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A SENSE OF PLACE: REGIONAL AMERICAN LITERATURE



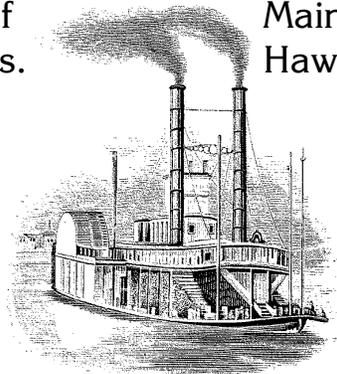
FROM THE EDITORS

United States literature frequently is viewed through the prism of the past. The writers most commonly read, studied and discussed, especially overseas, are those who etched their immortality decades, even generations ago. At the dawn of a new century, we think it is appropriate to consider the current generation of writers, the state of literature in contemporary America, and the trends that are most prevalent today.

One of the healthiest trends is the flourishing of regional literature, particularly that writing centered on “a sense of place.” Place is not only a geographical term: it can be anchored in a state of mind, or a sense of values.

Its manifestation can be geographical, or physical, or sociological. It can be tangible — visual and tactile — or intangible, rooted in nostalgia, or the imagination.

In this issue of *U.S. Society & Values*, we seek to explore the meaning of “place” in contemporary regional American literature. The reader will encounter variations on that theme, and how writers have applied it, and continue to do so, in their work. In passing, we hope one will gain a greater appreciation for the breadth of writing in the United States today, from Stephen King’s Maine to Garrett Hongo’s Hawaii.



This drawing of a Mississippi steamboat is a likeness from the cover of a new edition of Mark Twain’s Life on the Mississippi, to be published in late 1996 by Oxford University Press..

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REGIONAL AMERICAN LITERATURE: GETTING TO KNOW US

By Michael J. Bandler

In a few choice sentences in each of his novels of contemporary family life, novelist Pat Conroy lifts the veil on the Low Country of South Carolina that he has known from boyhood. E.L. Doctorow, with resonant word images, reveals New York sites and experiences from an earlier time that have meaning for our day. Ivan Doig, from the rugged crags of the western United States, weaves sentences together and opens readers' eyes to the vastness of Montana, while David Guterson, traversing the land, dapples pages of his books with glimpses of life on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

Regional literature is thriving these days across the United States, from Stephen King's Maine to Garrett Hongo's Hawaii. The sheer impact of the contributions of hundreds of novelists, poets, essayists, naturalists and biographers is palpable. Indeed, to gain a sense of the nation — its landscape, its spirit, its achievements and its challenges — one might do well to forgo the specificities of guidebooks, and simply turn to the works of literary artists, just as others might turn, in different circumstances, to the canvases of visual artists.

There is nothing new, actually, about a regional tradition in American literature. It is as old as Native American legends, as evocative of place as the 19th-century writings of James Fenimore Cooper and Mark Twain and Bret Harte, as vibrant as the worlds

created earlier in this century by novelist William Faulkner

and playwright Tennessee Williams, as reflective of society as the novels of Sinclair Lewis and Eudora Welty. Today, these writers and others from generations past have contemporary counterparts, who are keeping the tradition alive.

Regional literature in the 1990s is expansive and diverse. It infiltrates genres. It is mirrored in the writings of tenth-generation Americans and those of the new ethnics. The special properties of certain regions loom in poetry and drama, as well as in fiction and nonfiction. Regional writing reflects, as before, not only geography, but also moods and yearnings, dialects and idiosyncrasies. It encompasses the tangible and the intangible. For the most part, the literature of "place" tends to be rooted, involved, committed — frequently striking what nature essayist Barry Lopez calls a "hopeful tone" in "an era of cynical detachment." And it proclaims, at the dawn of a new century, that American culture is creative and meaningful, from one tract of land to another, and on all social and economic levels as well.

Interest and participation in regional literature — coming, critic Sven Birkerts suggests, in response to the minimalist or postmodernist fiction of the past generation — is enjoying considerable impact, with accompanying reverberations. It has given rise, for instance, to the launching of a number of bookstores — such as Boston's Globe and Chicago's Savvy

Traveler — specializing in fiction and nonfiction related to particular spots, arranged by site. Thus a would-be traveler who heads for the bookstore shelf marked “Southwestern United States” in advance of a trip to that region quite likely will find Tony Hillerman’s mysteries and Rudolfo Anaya’s novels available for purchase.

Cause and effect can blur. It is difficult to ascertain, for example, whether smaller regional publishing houses sprang up because of a wealth of writers in their area, or whether the opening of such firms sparked a literary explosion there. Still, the fact is that regional publishers and regional writers are contributing mightily to literature in America. Moreover, in addition to the ascent of such publishers as Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, which has introduced readers to an array of North Carolina writers such as Clyde Edgerton and Jill McCorkle, the number of regional literary journals continues to grow. Add to that the support, for more than a quarter-century, that the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts provided to both established and fledgling literary workshops that discovered new talents across the nation. (Although the U.S. Government no longer is able to provide the level of funding it has in the past, because of budgetary constraints, the corporate and private sectors continue to support these activities.)

The picture, then, is a healthy one, and both writers and readers are beneficiaries.



Who are these writers, and where are they? And how does “place” manifest itself?

A journey along the byways of regional literature might begin in the Northeast — in Bangor, Maine, home of Stephen King, one of the nation’s more popular fabulists. Making use of his base, he has created an endless string of fantasy and horror best-sellers set in the state. Across the boundary of New

England, Albany, New York, is the focus of attention of one of its native sons, journalist turned novelist William Kennedy, whose stories set in the state capital capture elegiacally yet often raucously the lives of the denizens of the city’s streets and saloons.

New York City may have more writers per capita than any other city in the United States — and possibly the world — yet most of them aren’t writing about their town. Indeed, for a place so indelibly etched in the minds of tourists and other travelers, New York has been captured only by a select few novelists who, more often than not, use the literary form to focus on social concerns. Tom Wolfe — predominantly a writer of nonfiction — may have created the quintessential New York City novel when he wrote *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, a swirling seriocomic work about the interconnection of politics and society. Equally focused, in treating New York life at earlier moments in time, are the writings of E.L. Doctorow. They capture the city’s moods at various moments in the past 100 years: the tensions of turn-of-the-century America, the lawlessness of the Prohibition years, the wide-eyed futurism triggered by the 1939 World’s Fair, and the sober realities of the Cold War era — all with the city as backdrop. And, for glimpses into down-home life on the streets of the boroughs, readers can choose from the innocence of Avery Corman’s neighborhood imagery; the more visceral, crime-infested world as depicted in the fiction of Richard Price; and the rhythmic pulses of the city’s Hispanic section that novelist Oscar Hijuelos knows so intimately.

Moving past central Pennsylvania, where John Updike traced the peripatetic journey of one Rabbit Angstrom against the backdrop of more than three decades of American contemporary history, we journey to Maryland. There, in the environs of Baltimore, Anne Tyler continues to delineate, in spare, quiet language, ordinary and extraordinary events in the lives of her characters — and the introverted mood of the region as well. On the Chesapeake Bay waterways lapping against the state’s eastern shore, where novelist John Barth has reigned for years, we find a new talent, Christopher Tilghman, centering his writings on those waterways.

Down the interstate from Baltimore is the U.S. capital. Washington may appear, to readers, to enjoy a special place in American fiction, given the number of plots of popular political and global suspense adventures that either unfold there or find their way there in the course of the tale. But they are not true Washington novels. More worthy of the title are the writings of Ward Just, a onetime international

correspondent who switched to a second career, creating in fiction the world he knows best — populated by journalists, congressmen, diplomats and military figures — and focusing not on political machinations or world crises, but on emotional nuances and psychological effect.

Moving past Richmond, Virginia, scene of the crimes in which mystery novelist Patricia Cornwell's protagonist, medical examiner Kay Scarpetta, is enmeshed, we reach North Carolina. This state is home to Algonquin Books and to a rich literary tradition that boasts, among others, Thomas Wolfe. More recently, Reynolds Price, Anne Tyler's mentor, has been described by a critic as holding the obsolescent post of "Southern-writer-in-residence," although others of the period were also worthy of the title. Concentrating on the people and land of eastern North Carolina, Price wrote several books about a young woman named Rosacoke Mustian, then shifted his focus to other themes before returning to a female protagonist in 1986. Jill McCorkle, still in her 30s, represents the newest generation of North Carolina writers. Setting her novels and short stories largely in the small towns of the state, she has focused on subjects ranging from the mystique of teenagers in America's heartland to the particular sensibilities of contemporary Southern women. The lore and history of the southern Appalachians are central to the homespun fiction of Lee Smith, while the sensitive antennae of Clyde Edgerton — a Mark Twain for our day — are tuned in to Carolinians ripe for satire. If Edgerton is in the Twain mold, then T.R. Pearson is this generation's Faulkner — with Neely, North Carolina, replacing Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi.

South Carolina was placed on the map by Pat Conroy. His bracing autobiographical novels about his household — dominated by his tyrannical, often abusive father — are awash in ambivalence, as downbeat themes about his dysfunctional family are countered by the lush descriptions of the natural beauty of the Low Country, on the nation's eastern coast. Even before confronting the lingering sores of his home life and schooling, however, he wrote a beautiful work of nonfiction, *The Water Is Wide*. In it,

he described his experiences as a young, untested schoolteacher working with impoverished children on a barrier island off the Carolinas.

The midwestern U.S. heartland continues to produce a wealth of writing talent, heirs to Willa Cather and Eudora Welty — and to rugged urban literati like Saul Bellow as well. If urban literature is somewhat in repose these days, Chicago writers like Scott Turow — whose legal dramas have set a standard for much of the genre — and Stuart Dybek — author of fiction rooted in the city's ethnic environs — are keeping the city on the literary map. Jane Smiley, who teaches writing at the University of Iowa, is prominent among the rural talents. Before skewering academic life in her most recent book, *Moo*, she won the 1992 Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *A Thousand Acres*, a transplant of Shakespeare's *King Lear* to contemporary America. It chronicles the bitter family feud unleashed when an aging farmer decides to turn his land over to his three daughters. Not far away, Louise Erdrich, part Chippewa Indian, has written some powerful pieces of fiction set in North Dakota, homing in on the tangled lives of Native American families. She is one of the progenitors of a younger group of Native American writers on the plains and in the West that includes Susan Power, Linda Hogan and Sherman Alexie.

In a more popular vein, Larry McMurtry, a fixture of the bestseller lists, has borne witness to the perambulations of Texas history, from the frontier to the freeway, and, as his characters shift their bases to Las Vegas and Hollywood, he changes his settings as well. Meantime, Texas' ethnic side is being given strong voice by Sandra Cisneros. Her short fiction, collected in *Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories*, about Mexican Americans in San Antonio and other border communities, dovetails neatly with her first anthology, *The House on Mango Street*, centered on a young Hispanic-American girl in Chicago.

Another "border" writer worth noting is Douglas C. Jones, one of the nation's most underrated novelists. He has masterfully traced the westward push — and disappearance — of the frontier in a series of profoundly evocative novels centering mostly on one family, tracing its lives from the mid-19th century to the 1930s, across a stretch of land from Tennessee to the Continental Divide (the Rocky Mountains). Other Southern writers of note include Bobbie Ann Mason — one of the more rooted chroniclers of contemporary family life in the state of Kentucky — and Mississippi's Lewis Nordan, a discovery of Algonquin Books, whose novels are principally

linked to the U.S. Civil War and the advent of integration.

The land straddling the Rockies has become a fertile literary tract. Cormac McCarthy can be found there, exploring the U.S. Southwest in several of his novels after transplanting himself from Tennessee. This reclusive writer with a limitless imagination has only gotten his due in the marketplace in the past several years. Generally considered the rightful heir to the Southern Gothic tradition, McCarthy is as intrigued by the wildness of the terrain as he is by human savagery and unpredictability. Native American writer Leslie Marmon Silko, born and raised in New Mexico, has gained a large general audience through her fiction, particularly *The Almanac of the Dead*. It offers a panorama of the region, from ancient tribal migrations to present-day drug runners and corrupt real estate developers reaping profits by misusing the land (a theme frequently explored by mystery writer Carl Hiaasen with Florida as a backdrop). It is a perfect complement to the thrillers of Tony Hillerman, of Santa Fe, whose detective stories feature two low-key Navajo policemen as protagonists. John Nichols, with affection, good humor and intelligence, has treated the cultural heritage and sensibilities of ethnic New Mexico in a lauded trilogy, including, most notably, *The Milagro Beanfield War*. And Hispanic-American novelist-poet Rudolfo Anaya adds themes of mysticism and spirituality to the literature of this region.

Something about Montana, to the north, must be special to produce such a rich and diverse lode of writing talent. The rugged fictive narratives of Ivan Doig, including a family trilogy, center on what he describes as “the westering expanse of this continent.” His books, such as *English Creek* and *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, are complemented by the minimalist fiction and nonfiction writings of Rick

Bass, which revolve around mountains and wilderness, and the disaffected, rootless antiheroes of Thomas McGuane’s novels. Add to these writers Native American poet-novelist James Welch, who details the struggles of the members of his ethnic group to find meaning within the historical tensions in their lives.

For decades, two writers personified the Far West, specifically California. Wallace Stegner, an Iowa native, spent the bulk of his life in various locales between the Rockies and the Pacific Ocean. He had a regional outlook even before it was in vogue, and many writers today look to him as their progenitor/mentor. His first major work, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943), chronicles a family caught up in the American Dream in its Western sensibility in the aftermath of the disappearance of the frontier. The epic ranges from Minnesota in the Midwest to the state of Washington in the Northwest, and concerns itself with “that place of impossible loveliness that pulled the whole nation westward,” in Stegner’s words. In 1972, he won the Pulitzer Prize for *Angle of Repose*, a reflection of the spirit of place in the personality of a woman illustrator and chronicler of the Old West. Stegner’s untimely death in an automobile accident in 1993 robbed American literature of an artist in his productive golden years. Complementing Stegner over time has been Joan Didion, journalist and novelist, who put contemporary California on the map in her 1968 nonfiction volume, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, and in her incisive, shocking 1971 novel about the aimlessness of the Hollywood scene, *Play It As It Lays*. But she has moved to other areas of interest in recent books. Her role as a California writer has been partly assumed by several younger talents, among them Lisa See — who has recorded the turbulent history of Asian migration to California and the West Coast — and two mystery writers, Sue Grafton, who conveys the sense of languor of the beach communities of present-day southern California, and Walter Mosley, whose African American detective hero probes his cases against the tapestry of post-World War II Los Angeles. Then, too, other ethnics, specifically Asian-Americans Amy Tan and Fae Myenne Ng and (with an East Coast setting) Chang-Rae Lee and Gish Jen use “place” as the background for explorations of their hyphenated status.

Far to the northwest, in Oregon and Washington, a spirit of place abides in the writings of naturalist Barry Lopez and novelist/essayist David Guterson. Guterson, in fact, has become something of a cult favorite with the continuing success of his first novel,

Snow Falling on Cedars, a study of the events surrounding a murder trial of a Japanese-American fisherman on a remote island off the coast of the state of Washington. And Sherman Alexie, who finds great joy and enchantment in his Native American tradition, has been tabbed as one of the more promising young writers of today. And way offshore, Hawaii's literary expansion is apparent in the works of Garrett Hongo — particularly his memoir, *Volcano* — and the offbeat fiction of Lois-Ann Yamanaka.



Two parallel literary forms rooted today in “place” deserve mention. The linkage of one — poetry — to that sensibility is inherent in the art form. Poets have minimal time to gain readers’ attention, as opposed to writers of fiction or nonfiction, who enjoy the luxuries of paragraphs and pages. And so a sense of place, where appropriate, invariably comes into play. In the past, the United States boasted of Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg; today, the roster of poets attuned to “place” includes Amy Clampitt, W.S. Merwin and Gary Snyder.

Drama, though, is a more interesting case in point. To a significant degree, the expansion of the sense of place in contemporary theater can be directly attributed to the growth of the regional theater movement. These nonprofit institutional companies that have become centers of culture on the urban and suburban scene, mostly since the mid-1960s, have the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts — and expanded corporate support — to thank. And with the establishment of first-rate troupes outside the traditional New York City hub — in places like

New Haven and Hartford, Connecticut, and Louisville, Kentucky — a parallel surfacing of gifted young dramatists has transpired. One wonders what American theater, and literature, would be like today without the coruscating fragmented society depicted in the works of Sam Shepard, the monosyllabic, staccato Chicago street talk of David Mamet, the range of 20th-century life experienced by the heroes and heroines of August Wilson’s continuing play cycle, the introspective glimpses into Midwestern lives and concerns reflected by Lanford Wilson, and the Southern eccentricities of Beth Henley. Whereas their progenitors — Eugene O’Neill, William Inge and Tennessee Williams — directed their plays at the centralized theater audience of New York City, the newer dramatists are shaped and nurtured within their regions and others before facing that alien urban stage.



So many writers are bringing their own uncommon impressions to American literature. They are impassioned as they describe and analyze, for readers the world over, what they see on the surface of and beneath the landscape, and beyond the horizon. Literally and figuratively, they are bringing new hues, new perspectives and new meaning, through literature, to the places in their hearts across the United States. ■

A LITERATURE OF PLACE

By Barry Lopez

(The identification with “place,” for writers of both fiction and nonfiction, has diverse linkages. It can be geographic, or physical, or social. It can be pegged to time, or be timeless. This essay is based in part upon a presentation by the author at the Salamanca Writers Festival in Hobart, Tasmania, in March 1996. In it, he reflects upon how the writer, and, indeed, by extension, the reader, can form a relationship with “place.”)

In the United States in recent years, a kind of writing variously called “nature writing” or “landscape writing” has begun to receive critical attention, leading some to assume that this is a relatively new kind of work. In fact, writing that takes into account the impact nature and place have on culture is one of the oldest — and perhaps most singular — threads in American literature. Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick*, Henry David Thoreau, of course, and novelists such as Willa Cather, John Steinbeck and William Faulkner come quickly to mind, and more recently Peter Matthiessen, Wendell Berry, Wallace Stegner, and the poets W.S. Merwin, Amy Clampitt and Gary Snyder.

If there is anything different in this area of North American writing — and I believe there is — it is the hopeful tone it frequently strikes in an era of cynical detachment, and its explicitly dubious view of technological progress, even of capitalism.

The real topic of nature writing, I think, is not nature but the evolving structure of communities from which nature has been removed, often as a consequence of modern economic development. (A recent conference at the Library of Congress in Washington, “Watershed: Writers, Nature and Community,” focused on this kind of writing. It was the largest literary conference ever held at the Library. Sponsors, in addition to the Library, were U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Hass and The Orion Society of Great Barrington, Massachusetts.) It is

writing concerned, further, with the biological and spiritual fate of those communities. It also assumes that the fate of humanity and nature are inseparable. Nature writing in the United States merges here, I think, with other types of post-colonial writing, particularly in Commonwealth countries. In numerous essays it addresses the problem of spiritual collapse in the West, and like those literatures it is in search of a modern human identity that lies beyond nationalism and material wealth.

This is a huge — not to say unwieldy — topic, and different writers approach it in vastly different ways. The classic struggle of writers to separate truth and illusion, to distinguish between roads to heaven and detours to hell, knows only continuance, not ending or solution. But I sense collectively now in writing in the United States the emergence of a concern for the world outside the self. It is as if someone had opened the door to a stuffy and too-much-studied room and shown us a great horizon where once there had been only walls.

I want to concentrate on a single aspect of this phenomenon — geography — but in doing so I hope to hew to a larger line of truth. I want to talk about geography as a shaping force, not a subject. Another way critics describe nature writing is to call it “the literature of place.” A specific and particular setting for human experience and endeavor is, indeed, central to the work of many nature writers. I would say a sense of place is also critical to the development of a sense of morality and of human identity.

After setting out a few thoughts about place, I’d like to say something about myself as one writer who returns again and again to geography, as the writers of another generation once returned repeatedly to Freud and psychoanalysis.

It is my belief that a human imagination is shaped by the architectures it encounters at an early age. The visual landscape, of course, or the depth, elevation and hues of a cityscape play a part here, as does the way sunlight everywhere etches lines to accentuate forms. But the way we imagine is also affected by streams of scent flowing faint or sharp in the larger oceans of air; by what the composer John Luther Adams calls the sonic landscape; and, say, by an awareness of how temperature and humidity rise and fall in a place over a year.

My imagination was shaped by the exotic nature of water in a dry California valley; by the sound of wind in the crowns of eucalyptus trees, by the tactile

sensation of sheened earth, turned in furrows by a gang plow; by banks of saffron, mahogany, and scarlet cloud piled above a field of alfalfa at dusk; by encountering the musk from orange blossoms at the edge of an orchard; by the aftermath of a Pacific storm crashing a hot, flat beach.

Added to the nudge of these sensations were an awareness of the height and breadth of the sky, and of the geometry and force of the wind. Both perceptions grew directly out of my efforts to raise pigeons, and from the awe I felt before them as they maneuvered in the air. They gave me permanently a sense of the vertical component of life.

I became intimate with the elements of that particular universe. They fashioned me, and I return to them regularly in essays and stories in order to clarify or explain abstractions or to strike contrasts. I find the myriad relationships in that universe comforting, forming a “coherence” of which I once was a part.

If I were to try to explain the process of becoming a writer I could begin by saying that the comforting intimacy I knew in that California valley erected in me a kind of story I wanted to tell, a pattern I wanted to invoke — in countless ways. And I would add to this the two things that were most profoundly magical to me as a boy: animals and language. It’s easy to see why animals might seem magical. Spiders and birds are bound differently than we are by gravity. Many wild creatures travel unerringly through the dark. And animals regularly respond to what we, even at our most attentive, cannot discern.

It’s harder to say why language seemed magical, but I can be precise about this. The first book I read was *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. I still have the book. Underlined in it in pen are the first words I could recognize: the, a, stop, to go, to see. I can pick up the book today and recall my first feelings like a slow, silent detonation: words I heard people speak I was now able to perceive as marks on a page. I, myself, was learning to make these same marks on ruled paper. It seemed as glorious and mysterious as a swift flock of tumbler pigeons exploiting the invisible wind.

I can see my life prefigured in those two kinds of magic, the uncanny lives of creatures different from me (and, later, of cultures different from my own); and the twinned desires to go, to see. I became a writer who travels and one who focuses mostly, to be succinct, on what logical positivists sweep aside.

My travel is often to remote places — Antarctica, the Tanami Desert in central Australia, northern Kenya. In these places I depend on my own wits and resources, but heavily and just as often on the knowledge of interpreters — archaeologists, field scientists, anthropologists. Eminent among such helpers are indigenous people, and I can quickly give you three reasons for my dependence on their insights. As a rule, indigenous people pay much closer attention to nuance in the physical world. They see more, and from a paucity of evidence, thoroughly observed, they can deduce more. Second, their history in a place, both tribal and personal, is typically deep. These histories create a temporal dimension in what is otherwise only a spatial landscape. Third, indigenous people tend to occupy the same moral universe as the landscape they sense.

Over time I have come to think of these three qualities — intimate attention; a storied relationship to place rather than a solely sensory awareness of it; and living in some sort of ethical unity with a place — I have come to think of these things as a fundamental human defense against loneliness. If you’re intimate with a place, a place with whose history you’re familiar, and you establish an ethical conversation with it, the implication that follows is this: the place knows you’re there. It feels you. You will not be forgotten, cut off, abandoned.

As a writer I want to ask myself: How can you obtain this? How can you occupy a place and also have it occupy you? How can you find such a reciprocity?

The key, I think, is to become vulnerable to a place. If you open yourself up you can build intimacy. Out of such intimacy will come a sense of belonging, a sense of not being isolated in the universe.

My question — how to secure this — is not idle. I want to be concrete about this, about how, actually, to enter a local geography. (We often daydream, I think, about entering childhood landscapes that dispel our anxiety. We court these feelings for a few moments in a park sometimes or during an afternoon in the woods.) Keeping this simple and practical, my first suggestion would be to be silent. Put aside the

bird book, an analytic frame of mind, any compulsion to identify, and sit still. Concentrate instead on feeling a place, on using the sense of proprioception. Where in this volume of space are you situated? What is spread out behind you is as important as what you see before you. What lies beneath you is as relevant as what stands on the horizon. Actively use your ears to imagine the acoustical space you occupy. How does birdsong ramify here? Through what air is it moving? Concentrate on smells in the belief that you can smell water and stone. Use your hands to get the heft and texture of a place — the tensile strength in a willow branch, the moisture in a pinch of soil, the different nap of leaves. Open the vertical line of this place by consciously referring the color and form of the sky to what you see across the ground. Look away from what you want to scrutinize to gain a sense of its scale and proportion. Be wary of any obvious explanation for the existence of a color, a movement. Cultivate a sense of complexity, the sense that another landscape exists beyond the one you can subject to analysis.

The purpose of such attentiveness is to gain intimacy, to rid yourself of assumption. It should be like a conversation with someone you're attracted to, a person you don't want to send away by making too much of yourself. Such conversations, of course, can take place simultaneously on several levels. And they may easily be driven by more than simple curiosity. The compelling desire, as in human conversation, may be for a sustaining or informing relationship.

A succinct way to describe the frame of mind one should bring to a landscape is to say it rests on the distinction between imposing and proposing one's views. With a sincere proposal you hope to achieve an intimate, reciprocal relationship that will feed you in some way. To impose your views from the start is to truncate such a possibility, to preclude understanding.

Many of us, I think, long to become the companion of a place, not its authority, not its owner. And this brings me to a closing point. Perhaps you wonder, as I do, why over the last few decades people in Western countries have become so anxious about the fate of undeveloped land, and concerned about losing the intelligence of people who've kept intimate relationships with those places. I don't know where your thinking has led you, but I believe this curiosity about good relations with a particular stretch of land is directly related to speculation that it may be more important to human survival now to be in love than

to be in a position of power. It may be more important now to enter into an ethical and reciprocal relationship with everything around us than to continue to work toward the sort of control of the physical world that, until recently, we aspired to.

The simple issue of our biological plausibility, our chance for biological survival, has become so precarious, so basic a question, that finding a way out of the predicament — if one is to be had — is imperative. It calls on our collective imaginations with an urgency we've never known before. We are in need not just of another kind of logic, another way of knowing, but of a radically different philosophical sensibility.

When I was a boy, running through orange groves in southern California, watching wind swirl in a grove of blue gum, and swimming ecstatically in the foam of Pacific breakers, I had no such thoughts as these imperatives. I was content to watch a brace of pigeons fly across an azure sky, rotating on an axis that to this day I don't think I could draw. My comfort, my sense of inclusion in the small universe I inhabited, came from an appreciation of, a participation in, all that I saw, smelled, tasted and heard. That sense of inclusion not only assuaged my sense of loneliness as a child, it confirmed my imagination. And it is that single thing, the power of the human imagination to extrapolate from an odd handful of things — faint movement in a copse of trees, a wingbeat, the damp cold of field stones at night — to make from all this a pattern — the human ability to make a story, that fixed in me a sense of hope.

We keep each other alive with our stories. We need to share them as much as food. We also need good companions. One of the most extraordinary things about the land is that it knows this, and it compels language from some of us so that, as a community, we may actually speak of it. ■

Barry Lopez is a writer and essayist specializing in natural history writing. He is the author of several volumes of short fiction, including the Desert Notes/River Notes/Field Notes trilogy, as well as such works of nonfiction as Of Wolves and Men and National Book Award winner Arctic Dreams. He lives along a river in a rural sector of Oregon.

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MARK TWAIN, AMERICA'S REGIONAL ORIGINAL

By Henry B. Wonham

In 1895, Mark Twain, the great American novelist and essayist, spelled out some of the principles of his literary aesthetic with uncharacteristic candor.

Building upon a variety of influences and upon his own rich experience as an author, Twain (the pseudonym Samuel Langhorne Clemens chose to use) located the key to literary creativity in a concept he called “absorption.”

Specifically, he maintained, in *What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us*, the successful artist must be a regional specialist, who has endured

*...years and years of unconscious absorption;
years and years of intercourse with the life
concerned; of living it, indeed; sharing personally in
its shames and prides, its joys and griefs, its loves
and hates, its prosperities and reverses, its shows
and shabbiness, its deep patriotisms, its whirlwinds
of political passion, its adorations — of flag, and
heroic dead, and the glory of the national name.*

While the foreign writer can register and describe exterior scenes and events, he continued, only “the native novelist” can provide an accurate representation of the nation’s interior experience, “its soul, its life, its speech, its thought.” Literary creativity, according to Twain, depends on the unconscious accumulation of local knowledge, for the writer is ultimately less a creator than an “Observer of Peoples.”

The artist may travel, as Twain did compulsively throughout his career, but he has only one legitimate subject, only one reservoir of unconscious material from which to draw. When the “Observer of Peoples” is at home, “observing his own folk, he is often able to prove competency,” Twain observed in his essay. “But history has shown that when he is abroad observing unfamiliar peoples the chances are heavily against him.”

This theoretical commitment to a local or regional perspective in literature is surprising, given the frequency with which Mark Twain ignored it. He had made his mark on the international literary scene in 1869 with *The Innocents Abroad*, his sensationally popular travel book, and returned to the genre in a number of successful works, including *A Tramp Abroad* (1880) and *Following the Equator* (1897). Moreover, for all his ruminations on the subject of literary nativism, Twain frequently employed foreign settings in his fiction: England in *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882) and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889); Africa in *Tom Sawyer Abroad* (1894); France in *Personal Reflections of Joan of Arc* (1896); Switzerland and Austria in successive versions of “The Mysterious Stranger,” to name but a few examples of his exotic backdrops.

Yet even if the “Observer of Peoples” did venture beyond the local scene in a surprising variety of works, Twain’s defense of regionalism in *What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us* rings true as an account of what is most distinctive about his art. As readers have generally agreed for more than 100 years, Mark Twain is at his best at the level of village life, where regional peculiarities directly inform his conceptions of setting character. Even an abbreviated catalog of his most unforgettable rural villages is as diverse as it is long, each local setting distinguished by its own highly wrought linguistic styles and social arrangements.

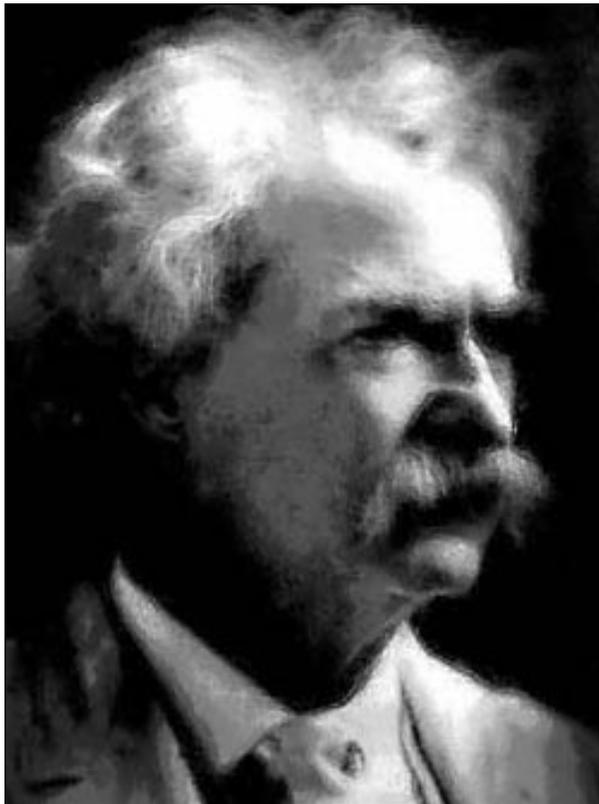
The roster includes Angel’s Camp in his 1865 piece of short fiction, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of

Calaveras County,” and Virginia City in *Roughing It* (1872). It ranges from St. Petersburg along the Mississippi River banks in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and Bricksville in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) to Dawson’s Landing in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894) and Hadleyburg in “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” (1899), as well as Eseldorf in Twain’s posthumously published “Mysterious Stranger” manuscripts.

Within each of these isolated communities, subtle differences in speech and custom are charged with significance. Resistance or conformity to rigid social norms is expressed in barely noticeable variations of syntax and diction, marking a character like Huck Finn as a substandard speaker and a potentially subversive force in the old racist South, or distinguishing a character like Pudd’nhead Wilson as an incipient member of the Southern U.S. political elite. As Twain intimates in the prefatory note which identifies the seven principal dialects employed in *Huckleberry Finn*, that novel’s finest ironies are highly localized and depend on the author’s intimate knowledge of regional particularities, his “unconscious absorption” of the soul, speech and thought of a specific American place. Through his mastery of such particularities, the regional writer gains access to universal rhythms of human nature, which are the essence, according to Twain, of the American novelist’s art.

Few readers would disagree that Mark Twain excelled as a regional writer, one whose capacity for meaningful expression is inherently bound to a specific sense of place. There is much less agreement, however, over where, in particular, Twain’s regional sensibilities lie. In fact, he enjoys the unique distinction of having been claimed by four different sectors of the United States as a spiritual native son.

Perhaps the most comprehensive effort to fix Twain’s regional identity has come from the South, where



scholars like Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Arlin Turner and Arthur Pettit have linked Twain’s achievement to historical and psychological currents underlying the tradition of Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren and Eudora Welty. Focusing on works like *Tom Sawyer*, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), *Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*, the Southern claimants describe Twain’s blend of nostalgia and disgust with the regions of his birth, noting that some of his finest work, like that of Faulkner, Warren and others, is rooted in a complex ambivalence about Southern culture, history and landscape.

Yet while Faulkner and many of his post-bellum compatriots seem almost

tragically wedded to a disintegrating Southern milieu, Mark Twain wasted little time — and perhaps little thought — on Missouri after 1861, when he boarded a Nevada-bound stagecoach with his brother Orion, rather than fight for the Confederacy in the U.S. Civil War. At age 26, he was already a “desouthernized Southerner,” in the words of William Dean Howells, a social commentator of the era.

Like the narrator of his irresistible Western book, *Roughing It*, Twain quickly abandoned his inappropriate Southern attire and assumptions, adopting instead the bohemian lifestyle of a self-professed “vagabondizing” Westerner. His five years

in Nevada and California were a crucial period of growth and discovery, during which Twain embarked on a career in journalism that would have lasting impact on his literary style and sensibility. When he arrived in New York City in January 1867, his regional literary identity was firmly established in the Far West, where he had become known to readers as “The Sagebrush Bohemian” and “The Wild Humorist of the Pacific Slope.”

Numerous critics have insisted that Twain’s literary achievement bears an unmistakably Western stamp. Yet he lived most of his adult life in the tidy Victorian splendor of Hartford, Connecticut, and earnestly sought to be identified with New England’s social and literary elites. The bumptious, rowdy Westerner and the ambivalent Southerner would seem to have little in common with the author who crooned over Hartford’s “sterling old Puritan community,” a community whose language, values and polite restraint he seemed to embrace in works like *The Prince and the Pauper* and *Joan of Arc*. The Eastern Mark Twain, like the Southern and Western version, also is the subject of voluminous critical literature which seeks to situate his regional identity in his profound relation to the literary, philosophical, religious and comic traditions of New England. Twain’s adult personality and mature literary persona, such critics have argued, share a regional inflection with the “Down East” humor of James Russell Lowell, the stubborn individualism of Henry David Thoreau, and the genteel liberalism of the Beechers, the Twitchells, the Aldriches, the Warners and other prominent members of his Hartford set.

Lastly, Mark Twain has been claimed as a Midwestern writer. His darkly satirical view of life in the upper Mississippi Valley links him to a prominent tradition of Midwestern ironists of the time and of the century since — including Howells, Hamlin Garland, Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser and Ernest Hemingway. It is perhaps revealing that the contemporary writer who has acknowledged his creative debt to Twain most publicly is Garrison Keillor, the storyteller, whose sardonic pastoralism revolving around the fictitious Lake Wobegon achieves a distinctive blend of humor and pathos, very much in the manner of *Huckleberry Finn*.

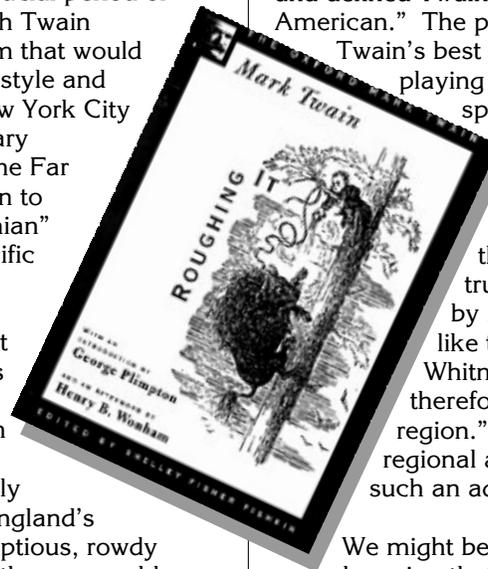
The endless critical squabbling over Twain’s regional affiliations suggests a paradox, which critic Howells perceived when he wisely dodged the regional issue

and defined Twain’s imagination as “entirely American.” The paradox is simply stated: Mark

Twain’s best writing is regionally inflected, playing on the subtleties of colloquial speech and social custom as only a local novelist can play. Yet unlike Faulkner, Bret Harte, Thoreau or Anderson, Twain belongs to no region. We might simply dismiss this paradox by affirming a critical truism expressed several years ago by David B. Kesterson — that Twain, like the 19th-century U.S. poet Walt Whitman, “contained multitudes” and therefore “could not be confined by one region.” But Twain’s self-professed regional aesthetic is more significant than such an adoring comment implies.

We might begin to address the paradox by observing that although the regional perspective is undeniably key to Twain’s creativity, his imagination just as characteristically balks at regional identification. Indeed, much as he idealized local settings from Hannibal to Hartford, the persistent gesture in Twain’s fiction is one of flight. Tom Sawyer escapes with his gang from St. Petersburg to the boy haven of Jackson’s Island. Huck Finn performs symbolic suicide in order to flee his violent, provincial home. Hank Morgan travels centuries to King Arthur’s Camelot and back. The narrators of *The Innocents Abroad*, *Roughing It* and *Life on the Mississippi* are compulsively on the move.

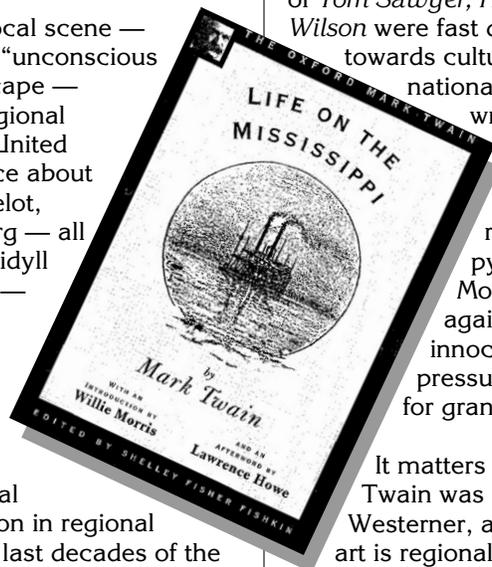
Howells understood his close friend’s peculiar need to imagine transcendence of the very cultural limitations that bring his art alive when he described Twain as a writer “originally of Missouri, but then provisionally of Hartford, and now ultimately of the Solar System, not to say the Universe.” As this wonderfully apt comment implies, Mark Twain is the quintessential regionalist in American literature, having derived more aesthetic capital from the local perspective than any other U.S. writer. Yet his imaginative tendency is to “light out for the Territory,” in Twain’s words, as an escape from cultural limitations — often expressed in provincial habits of speech and behavior — that restrict human freedom.



Jacket cover illustrations are from new editions of Mark Twain's Roughing It and Life on the Mississippi, part of a 29-volume set to be published in late 1996 by Oxford University Press. Used by permission.

Twain's ambivalence about the local scene — his simultaneous commitment to “unconscious absorption” and transcendent escape — betrayed the complexity of his regional associations with all parts of the United States. Moreover, his ambivalence about settings like St. Petersburg, Camelot, Dawson's Landing and Hadleyburg — all of which incorporate elements of idyll and nightmare in a troubling mix — captured the mood of the United States as it galloped toward an industrialized, urban reality in the post-Civil War era.

A wistful preoccupation with the image of America's vanishing rural communities inspired the explosion in regional and local color writing during the last decades of the 19th century, an explosion Twain helped to ignite with his representations of small-town life. Regional eccentricities of the sort that abound in the Far West of *Roughing It* and the ante-bellum Mississippi Valley



of *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* were fast disappearing in the frantic drive towards cultural, economic and political nationalization after the Civil War — and writers of the period responded by indulging in romantic images of America's rural past. Twain clearly participated in this retrospective vogue, but his own pyrotechnics, like those of Hank Morgan, were most often deployed against the local pastoral scene, whose innocence and remoteness from the pressures of industrialism he never took for granted.

It matters very little, finally, whether Mark Twain was most profoundly a Southerner, a Westerner, an Easterner or a Midwesterner. His art is regional *not* in the sense that it emerges out of a particular geographical or cultural milieu, but because in everything he wrote, he captured the anxiety of a culture poised between its rural past and its urban future, unsure whether to romanticize or to run from its history. Mark Twain excelled at doing both — often at precisely the same moment. Thus he is justifiably measured, from coast to coast, as our premier writer of regional prose. ■

Henry B. Wonham is Professor of American Literature at the University of Oregon. He has contributed the Afterword to a new edition of Roughing It, part of the 29-volume Oxford Mark Twain, being published by Oxford University Press in late 1996.

'COLORED PEOPLE' — REMINISCENCES OF HOME

By Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

(Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is the W.E.B. DuBois Professor of the Humanities at Harvard University, and a prominent essayist, critic and social commentator. What follow are excerpts from his recently published memoir, Colored People, centered on his childhood in a small rural West Virginia community in the years before the civil rights movement brought integration to the United States. Gates' meditations begin with some prefatory remarks addressed to his daughters. The text itself offers a glimpse of a place, with all its social, political and geographic implications.)

PREFACE

Dear Maggie and Liza:

I have written to you because a world into which I was born, a world that nurtured and sustained me, has mysteriously disappeared. My darkest fear is that Piedmont, West Virginia, will cease to exist, if some executives on Park Avenue decide that it is more profitable to build a complete new paper mill elsewhere than to overhaul one a century old. Then they would close it, just as they did in Cumberland with Celanese, and Pittsburgh Plate Glass, and the Kelly-Springfield Tire Company. The town will die, but our people will not move. They will not *be* moved. Because for them, Piedmont — snuggled between the Allegheny Mountains and the Potomac River Valley — is life itself.

I am not Everynegro. I am not native to the great black metropolises: New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, say. Nor can I claim to be a "citizen of the world." I am from and of a time and a place — Piedmont, West Virginia — and that's a world apart, a world of difference. So this is not a story of a race but a story of a village, a family, and its friends. And of a sort of segregated peace.

In your lifetimes, I suspect, you will go from being

African Americans, to "people of color," to being, once again, "colored people." (The linguistic trend toward condensation is strong.) I don't mind any of the names myself. But I have to confess that I like "colored" best, maybe because when I hear the word, I hear it in my mother's voice and in the sepia tones of my childhood. As artlessly and honestly as I can, I have tried to evoke a colored world of the fifties, a Negro world of the early sixties, and the advent of a black world of the later sixties, from the point of view of the boy I was.

COLORED PEOPLE

On the side of a hill in the Allegheny Mountains, two and a half hours northwest of Washington and southeast of Pittsburgh, slathered along the ridge of "Old Baldie" mountain like butter on the jagged side of a Parker House roll, sits Piedmont, West Virginia (population 2,565 in 1950, when I was born), the second major city of Mineral County. West Virginia is famous for its hills, the Allegheny Mountains, which run along the Potomac River in the east, the Ohio along the west, and the Kanawha and Guyandotte in the south. And of all the mountain ranges gazed upon by its riverine mountaineers, none is more beautiful than the south branch of the Potomac Valley, overlooked by Gates Point, the highest promontory in the county, rising above Patterson's Creek.

It was in Piedmont that most of the colored people of Mineral County lived — 351 out of a total population of 22,000.

To my children, Piedmont as a whole must seem to be a graying, desiccated town, rotting away brick by brick, just like my old school. Its population is down to about eleven hundred souls, three hundred of whom are black, a population whose average age increases each year, so that the spirited figures who dominated my youth — those who survive, anyway — must strike my daughters as grizzled elders. No, my children will never know Piedmont, never experience the magic I can still feel in the place where I learned how to be a colored boy.

The fifties in Piedmont was a sepia time, or at least that's the color my memory has given it. Piedmont was prosperous and growing, a village of undoubted

splendors. I say a village, but that's an unpopular usage among some. ("Class Three City" is the official West Virginia state euphemism.)

Village or town, or something in between — no matter. People from Piedmont were always proud to be from Piedmont — nestled against a wall of mountains, smack-dab on the banks of the mighty Potomac. We knew God gave America no more beautiful location.

And its social topography was something we knew like the back of our hands. Piedmont was an immigrant town. White Piedmont was Italian and Irish, with a handful of wealthy WASPs [white Anglo-Saxon Protestants] on East Hampshire Street, and "ethnic" neighborhoods of working-class people everywhere else, colored and white.

For as long as anybody can remember, Piedmont's character has always been completely bound up with the Westvaco paper mill: its prosperous past and its doubtful future. At first glance, Piedmont is a typical dying mill town, with the crumbling infrastructure and the resignation of its people to its gentle decline. Many once beautiful buildings have been abandoned. They stand empty and unkempt, and testify to a bygone time of spirit and pride. The big houses on East Hampshire Street are no longer proud, but they were when I was a kid.

On still days, when the air is heavy, Piedmont has the rotten-egg smell of a chemistry class. The acrid, sulfurous odor of the bleaches used in the paper mill drifts along the valley, penetrating walls and clothing, furnishings and skin. No perfume can fully mask it. It is as much a part of the valley as is the river, and the people who live there are not overly disturbed by it. "Smells like money to me," we were taught to say in its defense, even as children.

Just below East Hampshire, as if a diagonal had been drawn from it downward at a thirty-degree angle, was Pearl Street, which the colored people called "Rat Tail Road," because it snaked down around the hill to the bottom of the valley, where the tracks of the B&O run on their way to Keyser, the county seat. Poor white people like Bonnie Gilroy's family lived down there, and five black families. We moved there when I was four.

Like the Italians and the Irish, most of the colored people migrated to Piedmont at the turn of the century to work at the paper mill, which opened in 1888.

Nearly everybody in the Tri-Towns worked there. The Tri-Towns — three towns of similar size — were connected by two bridges across sections of the Potomac less than a mile apart: Piedmont, West Virginia; Luke, Maryland; and Westernport, Maryland, the westernmost navigable point on the river, between Pittsburgh and the Chesapeake Bay. The Italians and the Irish...along with a few of the poorer white people, worked the good jobs in the paper mill, including all those in the craft unions. That mattered, because crafts demanded skill and training, and craftsmen commanded high wages. It was not until 1968 that the craft unions at the mill were integrated.

Until the summer of 1968, all the colored men at the paper mill worked on "the platform" — loading paper into trucks...The end product of the paper mill was packaged in skids, big wooden crates of paper, which could weigh as much as seven thousand pounds each. The skids had to be forklifted from the mill onto the shipping platform and then loaded into the huge tractor-trailers that took them to Elsewhere. Loading is what Daddy did every working day of his working life. That's what almost every colored grown-up I knew did. Every day at 6:30 a.m., Daddy would go off to the mill, and he'd work until 3:30 p.m., when the mill whistle would blow. So important was the mill to the life of the town that school let out at the same time. We would eat dinner at 4:00, so that Pop could get to his second job, as a janitor at the telephone company, by 4:30. His workday ended at 7:30, except when there was a baseball game, over in the Orchard or at the park in Westernport, in which case he would cut out early.

Almost all the colored people in Piedmont worked at the paper mill and made the same money, because they all worked at the same job, on the platform.

The colored world was not so much a neighborhood as a condition of existence. And though our own world was seemingly self-contained, it impinged upon the white world of Piedmont in almost every direction.

When Daddy was a teenager, dance bands used to come to the Crystal Palace Ballroom in Cumberland. They'd play a set or two in the evening for white people and then a special midnight show for the colored. Daddy says *everybody* would be there — the maimed, the sick, the dying, and the dead. Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway. And Piedmont's own Don Redman. Later, we had our own places to dance — the colored American Legion, and then the VFW.

It was amazing to me how new dances would spread in the black community, even to small towns like ours. Somebody'd be visiting his relatives somewhere, go to a party, and that would be that. He'd bring it back and teach everyone, showing it off in the streets in the evenings or at a party in somebody's basement.

Before 1955, most white people were only shadowy presences in our world, vague figures of power like remote bosses at the mill or tellers at the bank. There were exceptions, of course, the white people who would come into our world in ritualized, everyday ways we all understood. Mr. Mail Man, Mr. Insurance Man, Mr. White-and-Chocolate Milk Man, Mr. Landlord Man, Mr. Po-lice Man: we called white people by their trade, like allegorical characters in a mystery play. Mr. Insurance Man would come by every other week to collect premiums on college or death policies, sometimes fifty cents or less. But my favorite white visitor was the Jewel Tea Man, who arrived in his dark-brown helmet-shaped truck, a sort of modified jeep, and, like the Sears Man, brought new appliances to our house. I loved looking at his catalogues. Mr. Jewel Tea Man, may I see your catalogues? Please?

And of course, we would bump into the white world at the hospital in Keyser or at the credit union in Westernport or in one of the stores downtown. But our neighborhoods were clearly demarcated, as if by ropes or turnstiles. Welcome to the Colored Zone, a large stretched banner could have said. And it felt good in there, like walking around your house in bare feet and underwear, or snoring right out loud on the couch in front of the TV — swaddled by the comforts of home, the warmth of those you love.

People in Piedmont were virulent nationalists — Piedmont nationalists. And this was our credo:

All New York's got that Piedmont's got is more of

what we got. Same, but bigger. And, if you were a student: You can get a good education anywhere. They got the same books, ain't they? Just bigger classes, 'at's all.

Otherwise, the advantage was all to Piedmont. Did you know that Kenny House Hill was written about in "Ripley's Believe It or Not" as the only street in the world from which you can enter all three stories of the same building? That made it the most famous place in this Class Three City; other of our attractions were less well publicized.

Like Dent Davis's bologna, which was so good that when colored people came home to Piedmont for the mill picnic each Labor Day, they would take pounds of it back to whatever sorry homes they had forsaken Piedmont for, along with the bright-red cans of King Syrup...with the inset metal circle for a lid, the kind that you had to pry open with the back of a claw hammer...Some of them, those whose tastes were most rarefied, would take home a few jars of our tap water. And that was before anybody thought of *buying* water in bottles. People in Piedmont can't imagine that today. A dollar for a bottle of *water!* We had some *good* water in Piedmont, the best drinking water in the world, if you asked any of us.

Dent's bologna, and our water, and our King Syrup, and the paper mill's annual pic-a-nic, all helped account for Piedmont's tenacious grip upon its inhabitants, even those in diaspora. And then there was our Valley. I never knew colored people anywhere who were crazier about mountains and water, flowers and trees, fishing and hunting. For as long as anyone could remember, we could outhunt, outshoot, and outswim the white boys in the Valley. We didn't flaunt our rifles and shotguns, though, because that might make the white people too nervous. Pickup trucks and country music — now that was going *too far*, at least in the fifties. But that would come, too, over time, once integration had hit the second generation. The price of progress, I suppose. ■

FROM PLACE TO PLACE: WRITERS ON THE AMERICAN ROAD

By Sven Birkerts

(In the second half of this century, the United States became a more mobile society, as citizens first shifted from urban to suburban settings and then began transposing their lives more readily from one part of the country to another. Writers, like other Americans, naturally have been part of this shift. This article speaks to that development and its relationship to “place.”)

“The strengths of American literature,” writes English critic George Steiner, “have, characteristically, revealed themselves in regional clusters and local constellations.” Steiner means, I suspect, that given the nature of our history — the colonization, the slow movement westward — the artistic traditions of the United States are bound up significantly with locale.

Looking back, he offers the example of what he calls the “Hawthorne-Melville-Emerson-James grouping.” Never mind that Nathaniel Hawthorne set work in Italy, Herman Melville wrote vibrantly of the South Seas, and Henry James arranged most of his high-toned trysts in the capital cities of Europe — Steiner’s point stands. American writers, like all writers, write about what they know best, and one of the things they know best is the world around them. Our literature is suffused with place, and *places* — From James Agee’s Knoxville, Tennessee, and Louise Erdrich’s Dakota plains to John Steinbeck’s Salinas, California, and Mark Twain’s Mississippi River.

But times have changed. We find ourselves, quite suddenly, living in a watershed period, when all basic terms and traditions are being revised by the ubiquity and instantaneousness of electronic communications. Fewer and fewer people now grow up with roots deep in a community, a region, and with a grounding in

local lore. Population studies show that we have become increasingly multiregional; like Bedouins, we are accustomed to breaking camp and moving on. That a writer might nowadays live out a long life in one place — as Eudora Welty has in Jackson, Mississippi — is almost unthinkable. More in keeping with the spirit of our times is the experience of Richard Ford, also from Jackson, who moves steadily from place to place and fills his work with a shifting array of settings.

Moreover, place itself seems to be changing. We are now deep in the era of the homogenous. The architecture of our shopping malls and housing developments obliterates particularity and helps insure that wherever we go we will find, as Gertrude Stein put it, no there there. Our neighbors are now mainly people who have come in from elsewhere, and when we communicate with our soulmates and our kin it is less and less often in person and more often by telephone and electronic mail. Whatever the benefits of electronic communications, they do not foster a sense of geographic rootedness.

We might expect, then, that American literature would mirror this epochal transition, with characters coming unrooted and circumstances manifesting estrangement and blandness. And so, to a degree, it does, though rarely in works by writers of the literary mainstream. Looking to the minimalism of the 1970s and 1980s, or the postmodern novels of Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, Richard Powers and David Foster Wallace, we could easily theorize a dissolution of the immediacies of place. When DeLillo writes, in *White Noise*, “...we walked across two parking lots to the main structure in the Mid-Village Mall, a ten-story building arranged around a center court of waterfalls, promenades and gardens,” we realize that we could be anywhere in the United States. And that’s the point.

But we also find a striking and powerful countervailing trend: Writers and readers alike appear to be bewitched by place and, to an only slightly lesser degree, by the past. Indeed, the two are very often in combination. Consider the enormous recent popularity of David Guterson’s *Snow Falling on Cedars*, Larry McMurtry’s *Lonesome Dove*, Robert James Waller’s *The Bridges of Madison County* and, in an adjacent genre — autobiography — Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club*. The three novels, all looking back some decades, are place-saturated — Puget Sound, the Great Western Plains and rural Iowa are as essential as any characters or narrative turns. We could not imagine Mary Karr’s memoirs unfolding anywhere but in East Texas.

Alongside those works from our more recent best-seller lists, we find a number of arguably more estimable examples — Cormac McCarthy’s *All The Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*, William Kennedy’s Albany (New York) books, Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*, Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and *Beloved*, and the works of E. Annie Proulx.

Proulx, more than most, seems possessed by the possibilities of regional proteanism. Where her prize-winning novel, *The Shipping News*, inhabited the rocky promontories and eccentric inlets of the Maritime Provinces, her latest novel, *Accordion Crimes*, spans a period from the 1890s to the present and traverses, with authoritative detailing, American locales as different from each other as New Orleans, rural Maine, Montana and Missouri.

Proulx works her sentences with the keenest specificity, feeding the appetitive senses. “Through the rain-streeced windshield,” she writes,

Maine appeared as alternating plats of spruce, slash and clear-cut, withered acres of poplar and cherry, rolled-up leaves like charred scraps of paper on the defoliated trees, dark, too, with rain, and roadside moose the shade of old butternut husks, darkness unrelieved by whatever pale strip the sky unrolled, the crippled rivers and chains of lakes bordered by tattered horizons.

The same authorial sensibility gives us, among a dozen settings, this impression of the Rio Grande Valley in Texas:

He dimly remembered standing beside someone, a man, not his father, in the tangled fragrance of guajillo, black mimosa, huisache, in the cedar elms and the ebonies, watching a dark blue snake twine among the tiny leaves.

These are but single sentences extracted from longer passages of evocation, but even here, in miniature, we register a sense of the author’s intimacy of contact. The sinuosity of the prose itself suggests nuance and engagement. Nor is Proulx dealing just with the outermost particulars. The same sinuosity brings in the local inhabitants, their peculiarities of speech, their mannerisms and tics. For of course

place is not fully place for us until it has expressed itself in human terms.

Proulx worked for some time as a journalist, and in an interview with Amanda Bichsell she describes how she is always researching, filling notebooks with her observations about landscape, regional customs and the like. “That’s usually the part I do first,” Proulx explains, “construct the surroundings. The weather, the shape of the land, the kinds of streets and roads, the food we eat...the climate, the wind, the rock. All of those things are incredibly important in our lives, so when those things are established in a novel, for me, the characters literally step out of the landscape.”

Some might object that this is place researched, not lived; that these are details seized by an outsider — an anthropologist — and arranged to make a literary effect. But it would be an objection to a practice that goes back to the beginnings of the art, and remains the norm today. Richard Ford, recently the winner of the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for *Independence Day*, by his own tally has lived in 14 homes in nine states and has set his deeply observed “realist” stories and novels in most of the time zones. Then there is William Vollmann, prolific *enfant terrible* of contemporary letters, who thrusts himself into exotic locales in his frenzied research missions. Thus far, he has “done” Afghanistan, Vietnam, the Canadian tundra and San Francisco’s Tenderloin district — and he is not yet 40.

Obviously, then, there is a range — different kinds of immersions practiced by different kinds of writers for different reasons. Proulx is nothing like Ford, Ford is nothing like Vollmann. And none of these relative outsiders is like, say, Andre Dubus, the New Hampshire writer who has put in a long career studying the fraying blue-collar world of his Merrimack Valley; or Larry Brown, who lives in Faulkner’s own Oxford, Mississippi, and writes about that region with an insider’s special center of gravity.

But what exactly is the distinction between the rendition of places visited and places known profoundly? Moreover, if there is a distinction, who will discern it? Not only are most readers themselves outsiders to what they are reading about, but reader and writer alike are subject to the age-old variability of perception. Subjectivity rules this art as it rules every other. No two, or ten, writers will ever see the same Paris, or New York, or Tuscaloosa. Unless the artist commits some egregious misstep — adorning a northern facade with bougainvillea, say — few will arch the skeptical eyebrow.

The purist disagrees. Sure, craft and imagination can go a long way, and ignorance on the part of the reader can excuse a great deal, but nothing can feel as right, as natural, as possession from within. When an author knows a world in his or her very fiber, the difference is clear. It's like listening to real blues after a diet of well-intentioned imitators. Welty, Peter Taylor, John Updike, Rudolfo Anaya — here are writers who know their people and locales absolutely. Reading them, we feel that knowing. Not just through this or that detail of setting, but on every level. We sense the author's confidence from the rhythm and the diction. We note the rightness, the ease of characters in their settings. They belong.

Cormac McCarthy is one writer who puts these notions of insider/outsider to an interesting test. Raised mainly in eastern Tennessee, he set all of his early novels in his native region. Here was locale reflected from the inside by a writer overtly interested in the particularities of place. A passage from his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper*, illustrates this:

In late summer the mountain bakes under a sky of pitiless blue. The red dust of the orchard road is like powder from a brick kiln. You can't hold a scoop of it in your hand. Hot winds come up the slope from the valley like a rancid breath, redolent of milkweed, hoglots, rotting vegetation. The red clay banks along the road are crested with withered honeysuckle, pea vines dried and sheathed in dust. By late July the corn patches stand parched and sere, stalks askew in defeat. All greens pale and dry. Clay cracks and splits in endless microcataclysm and the limestone lies about the eroded land like schools of sunning dolphin, gray channeled backs humped at the infernal sky.

McCarthy already was a mature writer when he left the Appalachian area and moved to El Paso, Texas. Ten years later, he published *Blood Meridian*, the first of his novels to use a U.S. Southwest setting. Since then he has written the first two tales of his projected "border trilogy," *All the Pretty Horses* and *The Crossing*. Both have been celebrated for, among other things, their powerful presentations of place. And, indeed, looking closely at the following passage, comparing it with the earlier description, can we find any sign at all that this is not the prose of a man who has grown up in this very place, absorbing it with mother's milk?

The creek was clear and green with trailing moss braided over the gravel bars. They rode slowly up through the open country among scrub mesquite

and nopal. They crossed from Tom Green County into Coke County. They crossed the old Schoonover road and they rode up through broken hills dotted with cedar where the ground was cobbled with traprock and they could see snow on the thin blue ranges a hundred miles to the north.

The answer that McCarthy provides to the dichotomy of insider/outsider may be that writers and diarists who are responsive to the nuances of place are likely to be attuned to these nuances wherever they find themselves.

There is, finally, no way to generalize about the presence of place in contemporary writing except to say that it is, against expectations, vividly prominent.

This prominence is no great mystery. The changes in the world we live in — the estranging velocities, the electronic infiltration of the most basic transactions — are one thing. Our psychological responsiveness is quite another. The outer and inner experiences are in disequilibrium. We patrol the Internet, but what we crave are the simple pleasures of a good face-to-face talk. "Only connect," wrote E.M. Forster, and we know exactly what he meant.

Here literature takes on its compensatory role. If the daily round finds us strung out and distracted, we are not likely to pick up a novel looking for more of the same. And if we feel — as I believe we increasingly do — that we have come unmoored in space and time, that we are not claimed by community or a sense of historical participation as our forbears were, then we will find ways to remedy that lack.

Fiction is our supreme sense-making enterprise, our way of entering other lives while processing our own experience at the same time. What it seems to be offering us in the United States now, in happy abundance, is a chance to understand the terms of the trade we are making — giving up geographical rootedness for mobility and electronic reach — and to reap some of the satisfactions of a prior way of life, if only by proxy. ■

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WHERE DUNIT?

By Michael J. Bandler

It could have happened anywhere:

- A woman is missing, along with a priceless artifact.
- A casual shooting turns out to be premeditated.
- An insurance racket needs to be unmasked.
- An innocent man is accused of a heinous murder.

Anywhere. Each is the strand on which to hang the kind of hard-boiled detective story that is a staple, indeed, a creation, of American culture.

But if the crimefighters fashioned by the Mickey Spillanes, John D. MacDonalds and Dashiell Hammetts of the United States of the past were scruffier versions of the classic European amateur and professional detectives created by Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and others, today's American cop represents something more: a reconciliation with "place."

The priceless object mentioned above happens to be an Anasazi pot from the concealed recesses of the Native American heartland, and two detectives of Navajo extraction conduct this investigation and others in the crime novels of Tony Hillerman.

The casual shooting takes place in a crime-infested housing project in Boston, bringing a city cop invented by writer Robert B. Parker onto the case.

The insurance scam is part of a whole tapestry of greed in the wake of natural disaster and ecological peril, recurring themes in the Florida-based comic thrillers of Carl Hiaasen.

The "wrong man" in the murder probe is an inner-city amateur sleuth named "Easy" Rawlins, in the latest in a series of thrillers by Walter Mosley.

More than ever before in their history, police procedurals have become decidedly regional in their settings, outlooks and concerns. In the past, there were just a handful of "whodunit" writers like Californians Ross Macdonald and Hammett, Floridian John D. MacDonald, a writer or two from the urban streets like Spillane, and John P. Marquand, a refined New England novelist, who devised a series of crime-solving episodes involving a respectable Asian sleuth, Mr. Moto. The focus in earlier books was on internal considerations — specifically the criminal mind. Though that remains true of many mystery novels today, recently a number of storytellers' outlooks have turned decidedly outward, and now operate on a much broader canvas.

There no longer is a stereotypical detective on the prowl. Nor is there a conventional mystery writer.

As a result, readers identify writers with their particular areas of operation much more readily than in the past. They look forward to getting some chills and, at the same time, learning about Native American culture and its preservation through Hillerman's books involving Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and Officer Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police. Preservation of a different type — environmental — in the face of storms and schemes on the Florida landscape is what drives Hiaasen to resolutely demarcate "good guys" and villains in his books. As for the speech patterns of George V. Higgins and James Lee Burke characters, could they be from anywhere but Boston and southern Louisiana?

For Hillerman, a former New Mexico newsman of German-U.S. extraction and a journalism professor, the shift to fiction rooted in place about a quarter-century ago was natural given his passion for Native American culture. It was the cross-culturalization that intrigued him. The chance to portray the landscape followed alongside. Troubled by the limited awareness of that culture among the larger population, he once observed to an interviewer that he aimed to show how ancient ways "are still very much alive and are highly germane even to our ways."

In the spring when the snowpack melts a hundred miles away in the Chuska Mountains, Many Ruins

carries a steady stream. In the late-summer thunderstorm season it rises and falls between a trickle and booming flash floods, which send boulders tumbling like marbles down its bottom. In late autumn it dries. The life that occupied it finds water then only in spring-fed potholes. From where he stood on the sandstone shelf above such a pothole, Leaphorn could see the second of the ruins Etcitty had described. Two ruins, in fact.

Whether dealing with Zuni tribal rituals or the contours and properties of the reservation terrain, Hillerman, in the words of one critic, Ralph B. Sipper, “never loses his sense of place.”

That’s equally true of Hiaasen, one of a number of south Florida reporters-turned-mystery novelists. Is it the climate, or ecological peril, or some of the clientele of the resort communities (“The criminals come to Florida for the same reason that everyone else comes to Florida — the weather’s great and they blend in with the local riffraff so well,” Hiaasen says) that has galvanized him, as well as Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Edna Buchanan and former newsman John Katzenbach and others, towards crime fiction? Is it the uncertain natural forces that affect this region used to expecting the unexpected, with unpredictable damage potential? Whatever the case, schemers, polluters, developers come out the worst in his books, which are written with the passion of someone who remembers the ecology of Florida from his youth, and has witnessed its decline. “Where are we?” an unsavory character asks the unlikely hero of Hiaasen’s most recent tale, *Stormy Weather*, while huddled by a fire in a wooded creekside setting. “Middle of nowhere,” is the response. “Why?” she asks. “Because,” he answers, “there’s no better place to be.”

A couple of states westward, in Louisiana, James Lee Burke plies his trade through the persona of Dave Robicheaux, a New Orleans homicide detective. Pointing to such earlier U.S. writers of “place” as Stephen Crane, James T. Farrell, Flannery O’Connor and Ernest Hemingway as his principal influences, Burke contends that his literary philosophy is simple: “The character and the earth on which he stands are inseparable. He is shaped by the world around him.

“A writer who writes with a causal attitude towards his protagonists is always going to indicate, in an oblique way, the *raison d’être* for the ethos of the character, by involving the reader in those causal relationships between environment and behavior,” Burke elaborates. “But you do it with three-cushion shots [a billiards term connoting a sideways, rather than direct hit]— that’s the art.”

For one thing, Burke’s novels reflect the diversity of the society in the bayous of Louisiana, with its Cajun and African-American influences. The hoary ingrown political structure and remnants of the South in pre-civil rights days are strong presences. And yet, writing about Louisiana and New Orleans “just about as well as anyone ever has,” according to literary critic Jonathan Yardley, Burke gets beyond politics and society to the uniqueness of the region. As another reviewer noted, he enables the reader to get that sense of place, to “smell the particular sweetness of banana trees and stagnant water, taste...fried shrimp and cayenne pepper and thyme, watch pelicans rising against crimson sunsets.”

On the other side of the continent, Walter Mosley lets his audience know, forthrightly, exactly where they are:

Southeast L.A. was palm trees and poverty; neat little lawns tended by the descendants of ex-slaves and massacred Indians. It was beautiful and wild; a place that was almost a nation, populated by lost peoples that were never talked about in the newspapers or seen on the TV. You might have read about freedom marchers; you might have heard about a botched liquor store robbery (if a white man was injured) — but you never heard about Tommy Jones growing the biggest roses in the world or how Fiona Roberts saved her neighbor by facing off three armed men with only the spirit of her God to guide her.

Mosley, all of whose Rawlins thrillers have a color in their titles (*Devil in a Blue Dress*, *A Red Death*, *Black Betty*, *White Butterfly*, *A Little Yellow Dog*), is a perceptive observer of society, specifically the African-American experience in Los Angeles' Watts district and elsewhere during the postwar boom in the aerospace industry in the 1950s, a time of great possibilities. It is a world as far removed from Raymond Chandler's Hollywood as Chandler's elegant detective Philip Marlowe is from Easy Rawlins, and the author's exploration of the southeastern neighborhood he remembers from his youth — rather than the rest of Los Angeles which he visited only occasionally — is by design. As for that ambivalence between inequity and potential, it is what fuels his work. As he told an interviewer a year ago, Los Angeles "is forever a point of discovery — discovering the people around you and discovering who you are."

Hillerman, Hiaasen, Burke and Mosley reflect the preoccupation with surroundings so prevalent in mystery writing. And, like such contemporary writers as Richard Ford and Cormac McCarthy, a number have demonstrated their capacity to convey a sense of place even when removed from their home turf. Hillerman and George V. Higgins, the author of many Boston-based crime sagas, have been equally effective when setting episodes or full novels in Washington, D.C. Elmore Leonard, whose settings range from Detroit, Michigan, to Florida, New Orleans and Los Angeles, cites such masters of place as John Steinbeck and John O'Hara as models.

Similarly, Mosley — in temporarily taking leave of Easy Rawlins in mid-1995 to pen a non-genre novel, *RL's Dream* — painted an effective portrait, set in New York City, of an old African-American blues musician who recounts his life in flashback while dying of cancer. Conversely, Hispanic-American

novelist Rudolfo Anaya penned his first mystery, *Zia Summer*, in 1995, to be followed in September 1996 by *Rio Grande Fall*, steeped in old New Mexican traditions. And Sherman Alexie, the gifted Native American novelist, has just written his first thriller, *Indian Killer*, involving a serial murderer and a number of issues relating to Native Americans.

Whether today's crime novelist is peripatetic, like Leonard, or rooted in one spot like Sue Grafton, whose private eye Kinsey Millhone operates in a southern California beach community, the sense of place conveyed is keenly appreciated by the reader, who picks up on that relationship between environment and behavior that James Lee Burke summons. Even if the atmospherics are sociologically sobering rather than physically enthralling, there always exist possibilities and, as Walter Mosley notes, self-discoveries.

More than a half-century ago, Hemingway asserted, through one of his characters in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, that "the world is a fine place, and worth the fighting for."

And writing about, many of America's crime novelists would agree. ■

VOICES FROM THE REGIONS

By Michael J. Bandler

(A sense of place is best exemplified by passages in which figurative and literal sites are revealed, in geographic, visual and social contexts. This article offers some cases in point.)

Words sweep across the pages of American literature, bringing into view sights and sounds and images.

For those outside the United States, who can only imagine what visual splendors lie behind the undulating syllables “Florida” or “South Carolina” or the staccato rhythms of “Texas” or “Massachusetts,” American writers can be wondrous escorts. As authors delineate the places they know, from the pristine past of memory or perhaps from their everyday glimpses of a harsher present reality, they reveal, more intimately and more profoundly than travel guidebooks, the individual tiles of “place” which, when taken together, form a mosaic of the United States.

Readers might be transported across an ocean to the big city — such as the teeming streets of New York — and find enchantment there. In *World’s Fair*, E.L. Doctorow turns a sanitation company’s water wagon from a utility truck cleaning streets into a vehicular sorcerer, and the stream it leaves in its path becomes a newfound urban waterway:

The street was black and shining. In the raging course of water flowing swiftly along the curb I tossed [an] ... ice cream stick. Other children had appeared and dropped in their sticks and twigs. We followed our boats back down the block as they turned and twisted in the current, followed them down the gentle incline of Eastburn Avenue to their doom, a waterfall pouring into the sewer grate at the corner of 173rd Street.

David Guterson, who has gained recognition mostly for depicting the Pacific Northwest, also has vivid recollections of his boyhood in a small Rhode Island town in the Northeast. In one of the stories in his collection, *The Country Ahead of Us, the Country Behind*, he presents Wilkes as a place

... where the light in early winter seems to roll off the backs of the clouds and ignite along the waters of ponds and millstreams, and the cold rot smell of the barren forests comes ghostly out of the tough earth, and the gold air and sky have a muted volume of both space and spirit broken only by the reach of church spires, soft-white and giant against the slow maple hills.

What cuts deeply for Doctorow and Guterson — memory — is complemented by what viscerally affects Pat Conroy, and his autobiographical protagonist, Tom Wingo, in *The Prince of Tides*. “My wound is geography,” he observes, adding that “it is also my anchorage, my port of call...”:

I was born and raised on a Carolina sea island and I carried the sunshine of the low-country, inked in dark gold, on my back and shoulders. As a boy I was happy above the channels, navigating a small boat between the sandbars with their quiet nation of oysters exposed on the brown flats at the low watermark. I knew every shrimper by name, and they knew me and sounded their horns when they passed me fishing in the river.

Across the American landscape, in the high elevations of Montana brought to life by novelist Ivan Doig, nature and wildlife also have a role to play. In *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, he writes:

We came to the Two Medicine River in sunny mid-afternoon and were met by gusts of west wind that shimmered the strong new green of the cottonwood and aspen groves into the lighter tint of the leaves, bottom sides, so that tree after tree seemed to be trying to turn itself inside out. In the moving air as we and the sheep went down the high bluff, a crow lifted off straight up and lofted backwards, letting the gale loop him upward. I called to Varick my theory that maybe wind and not water had

bored this colossal open tunnel the Two Medicine flowed through. And then we bedded the sheep, under the tall trees beside the river.

Midway between the Carolinas and Montana, the nation's endlessly flat midsection reveals itself in Jane Smiley's description of a family's vast spread, in *A Thousand Acres*:

A mile to the east, you could see three silos that marked the northeastern corner, and if you raked your gaze from the silos to the house and barn, then back again, you would take in the immensity of the piece of land my father owned, six hundred forty acres, a whole section, paid for, no encumbrances, as flat and fertile, black, friable, and exposed as any piece of land on the face of the earth.

Writing in and about the southwestern United States, Rudolfo Anaya brings the landscape of his native New Mexico into precise focus promptly in the opening paragraph of *Bless Me, Ultima*:

Ultima came to stay with us the summer I was almost seven. When she came the beauty of the llano unfolded before my eyes, and the gurgling waters of the river sang to the hum of the turning earth. The magical time of childhood stood still, and the pulse of the living earth pressed its mystery into my living blood. She took my hand, and the silent, magic powers she possessed made beauty from the raw, sun-baked llano, the green river valley, and the blue bowl which was the white sun's home. My bare feet felt the throbbing earth and my body trembled with excitement. Time stood still, and it shared with me all that had been, and all that was to come....

Each writer's take on "place" is unique and personal. For many, including Richard Russo, who concentrates on the small towns of the U.S. Northeast, place is denoted by society. In Russo's case, the world he has known is in decline. He wistfully conveys this turn of events again and again in his books, as in this passage from *The Risk Pool*, set in mythical Mohawk, New York:

Summer had flown. Fourth of July. Mohawk Fair, Eat the Bird, and Winter... Indeed, a great deal of territory had been surrendered since our ancestors had stolen the land and erected white churches with felled trees. Up and down the Mohawk valley the green world had gone brown and gray, and the

people who lived beneath the smokestacks and in the shadows of the tanneries were scared that even the brown and gray might not last. They didn't know what came after brown and gray, and neither did I. One thing was for sure. Each Mohawk Fair was sadder and grayer than the last. And winter followed. With a capital W.

This sociological treatment of place finds its way as well into the writings of Ward Just, a foreign correspondent turned novelist whose trenchant tales of Washington life penetrate the emotions that pervade the nation's capital. In *Nicholson At Large*, he blends Baedeker with commentary as he observes:

He swept past the Washington Monument and into Rock Creek Park, the Jefferson Memorial to his left; the last time he'd seen Mr. Jefferson, cobwebs hung from his marble nose. In Washington, the monuments did not change. Landmarks were where they always were. The people changed but the buildings remained the same. He thought that in some ways the buildings and what they represented were more important than the people, they were manifestations of continuity. To those who lived in Washington they were apparitions from a submerged past and therefore an affirmation.

Similarly, John Berendt strikes at the heart of Savannah, Georgia, in his enduring nonfiction bestseller, *Midnight in the Garden of Good & Evil*. He observes that although the city had enchanted him, he also had come to understand the principal reason for its "self-imposed estrangement from the outside world," the fact that it was determined "to preserve a way of life it believed to be under siege from all sides." He writes:

For me, Savannah's resistance to change was its saving grace. The city looked inward, sealed off from the noises and distractions of the world at large. It grew inward, too, and in such a way that its people flourished like hothouse plants tended by an indulgent gardener. The ordinary became extraordinary. Eccentrics thrived. Every nuance

and quirk of personality achieved greater brilliance in that lush enclosure than would have been possible anywhere else in the world.

Ultimately, though, most writers who concentrate on a sense of place view their surroundings from a visual perspective. Thus, to Anne Rivers Siddons, who normally limns the southeastern section of the nation in her fiction, Palm Springs, California, emerges in her novel *Fault Lines* as

... a great swathe of green, a dense emerald prayer rug, flung down in all the tawny, wild-animal colors of the desert ... Palms, jacarandas, hibiscus, lantana and a great many other exotic flora for which I had no name yet, formed bowers and islands in the almost continuous velvet carpet that ... was a network of golf courses without parallel in the United States.

Even so, even when the focus is on description, a drop of fantasy invariably dapples the paragraph. The title village in *Volcano*, Hawaiian-born writer Garrett Hongo's memoir of childhood,

... is a big chunk of the sublime I'd been born to — the craters and ancient firepit and huge black seas of hardened lava, the rain forest lush with all varieties of ferns, orchids, exotic gingers and wild lilies, the constant rain and sun-showers all dazzled me, exalted me ... There was something magical

about it — a purgatorial mount in the middle of the southern ocean — and there was something of it native to me, an insinuation of secret and violent origins and an aboriginal past.

And, composing her thoughts from the hushed beauty and solitude of an island in the north central United States, between Canada and the state of Minnesota, Linda Hogan, a Native American poet and novelist reflects in *Solar Storms* on what it means when one is situated within "the hands of nature":

In these places things turned about and were other than what they seemed. In silence, I pulled through the water and saw how a river appeared through rolling fog and emptied into the lake. One day, a full-tailed fox moved inside the shadows of trees, then stepped into a cloud. New senses came to me. I was equal to the animals, hearing as they heard, moving as they moved, seeing as they saw.

Finally, the gifted writer can bring it all together — nature, place, society — with the wisp of nostalgia that always accompanies memory. Barbara Kingsolver reveals this in the title essay from her collection, *High Tide in Tucson*. Musing about the impact of having transplanted herself from rural Kentucky to the heat of Tucson, Arizona, she reveals that she still hears the "secret tides" of the creek back home "as I force tomatoes to grow in the drought-stricken hardpan of my strange backyard.

... yet I never cease to long in my bones for what I left behind. I open my eyes on every new day expecting that a creek will run through my backyard under broad-leafed maples, and that my mother will be whistling in the kitchen. Behind the howl of coyotes, I'm listening for meadowlarks.

In a larger sense, aren't we all? ■

WHO'S WHERE?



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IF YOU WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT . . .

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Selected Internet Sites on American Literature

Mark Twain Resources on the World Wide Web

"These pages list resources by or about Mark Twain. They range from texts of his books to an analysis of his character's appearance on 'Star Trek: The Next Generation.'" Major subdivisions of this site include:

Exhibits, E-Text Collections, Scattered Writings, Maxims and Quotations, Popular Culture, Sci-Fi TV, Homes and Haunts, Biography and Criticism, Teaching Resources, the Mark Twain Forum E-List, and Searching for Mark Twain.
<http://web.syr.edu/~fjzwick/twainwww.html>

Literary Resources on the Net

Developed by Jack Lynch, Ph.D. candidate in 18th-century literature at the University of Pennsylvania, this site comes close to being an inclusive collection of pointers for many of the major literary sources on the Web. The page is updated monthly and provides a comprehensive listing of scholarly resources arranged by broad subject category.
<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~jlynch/Lit/>

Salon

“. . .an interactive magazine of books, arts, and ideas,” Salon contains lengthy interviews with writers such as John Updike, Richard Ford, Louise Erdrich, and Amy Tan under the “books” subheading. Shorter interviews with other authors including Alice Walker, Barbara Kingsolver, and Joyce Carol Oates appear in the “Lit Chat” section.
<http://www.salon1999.com/archives/welcome/welcome.html>

Southwestern Writers Collection

This collection at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos contains books, manuscripts, personal papers, correspondence, and artifacts related to the literary and artistic spirit of the American Southwest. Other major components of this collection include photographs of the Southwest and Mexico, music, and films (e.g., “Lonesome Dove”) from this region. The Hispanic Writers Collection also at this site primarily covers the work of fiction writers, poets and playwrights, including Rudolfo Anaya and Ana Castillo.
http://www.library.swt.edu/alkek_lib/spec_coll/swwc/intro.html

The Criminal Element; An Annotated Guide to Mystery Fiction Sites on the World Wide Web

The General Interest Sites on this page provide links to many contemporary and classic mystery authors; comprehensive crime and detective sites; and prominent authors, collections and discussion groups. Also contains links to mystery newsletters;

electronic journals; the “Scrolling Mystery Theatre,” an episodic electronic serial; and “The Case,” a weekly solve-it-yourself mystery.
<http://www.geocities.com/Athens/5544/>

BDD Online

Pat Conroy, Elmore Leonard, Sara Paretsky, and Robert B. Parker are among the featured authors interviewed on this Bantam-Doubleday-Dell site. Also of interest are author profiles, information on previous books, and excerpts from new titles from these publishers.
<http://www.bdd.com/>

Current and Upcoming Titles By Regional Writers

Alexie, Sherman, *Indian Killer*, Atlantic Monthly Books

Anaya, Rudolfo, *Rio Grande Fall*, Warner Books
Bass, Rick, *The Book of Yaak*, Houghton Mifflin Company

Bell, Madison Smartt, *Ten Indians*, Pantheon

Brown, Larry, *Father and Son*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

Burke, James Lee, *Cadillac Jukebox*,

Hyperion Books

Cornwell, Patricia, *Cause of Death*, G.P. Putnam’s Sons

Doig, Ivan, *Bucking the Sun*, Simon and Schuster

Dorris, Michael, *Cloud Chamber*, Scribner’s
Grafton, Sue, *‘M’ Is For Malice*,

Henry Holt and Company

McCorkle, Jill, *Carolina Moon*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

Mosley, Walter, *A Little Yellow Dog*, W.W. Norton

Power, Susan, *Strong Heart Society*,

G.P. Putnam’s Sons

Proulx, E. Annie, *Accordion Crimes*, Scribner’s

Ravenel, Shannon, ed., *New Stories from the South: The Year’s Best, 1996*, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

Turow, Scott, *Laws of Our Fathers*, Farrar Straus & Giroux

ARTICLE ALERT

SOME RECENT ARTICLES OF SPECIAL INTEREST OFFERING INSIGHTS INTO U.S. SOCIETY AND VALUES

Adelman, Ken. WORD PERFECT (*Washingtonian*, vol. 31, no. 8, May 1996, pp. 29-32)
In this interview, poet Linda Pastan talks about why and how she writes poetry, and offers advice to writers and readers of poetry. As poet laureate of the state of Maryland, Pastan traveled around the state talking about poetry and reading her own poems in an effort to make poetry more accessible. Pastan's goal was "to help those who think they don't know anything about poetry, and are therefore afraid of it, learn that there isn't that much to 'know.'"

Barnes, Julian E. RECLAIMING OUR CITIES, BLOCK BY BLOCK (*The Washington Monthly*, vol. 28, no. 4, April 1996, pp. 42-44)
Little Rock, Arkansas, is transforming rundown areas of the city one street at a time through a program called "Model Blocks." The city combines federal grant money, private investment and its own resources to refurbish a single block. "Because revitalization efforts are concentrated in a small area, homeowners can work together and support each other," the author says. "And Model Blocks doesn't just give opportunity to a lucky few. The program aims to make renovation and renewal contagious...."

Coe, Robert. STEPPENWOLF HOWLS AGAIN (*American Theatre*, vol. 13, no. 5, May/June 1996, pp. 12-19, 60-61)
Chicago's risk-taking theater troupe, Steppenwolf is famed for its physicality and a willingness "to push ideas and emotions to startling extremes." It is moving into its third decade with eagerness and anticipation, anxious to reaffirm strengths, shore up weaknesses, and renew "the mythic impulse of friends putting on a show," the author writes. Steppenwolf has been an exemplar of the regional theater movement in the United States, creating new works that have had long lives at home and overseas, and bringing fresh acting talent — John Malkovich, Glenna Headly and Gary Sinise among its number — to the U.S. stage and screen.

Halperin, Samuel; and others. WORKING AT LEARNING (*Education Week*, vol. 15, no. 32, May 1, 1996, pp. 33-36)

In a special report, *Education Week* presents the views of five writers on the role of public schools in providing education beyond the classroom. The authors describe the pros and cons of school-to-work programs, which prepare students for careers, and service-learning and community-service programs, which seek to instill civic responsibility.

Kiester, Edwin Jr. GIVING MONEY AWAY WISELY OUGHT TO BE A PIECE OF CAKE (*Smithsonian*, vol. 26, no. 12, March 1996, pp. 54-67)
The American spirit of giving is alive and well in Lorain County, Ohio, where a small family foundation distributes financial grants ranging from a few hundred dollars to several thousand. While most people think of a foundation as a billion-dollar enterprise like Ford or Rockefeller, most American foundations are more like the Stocker Foundation — a small, little-known source of seed money that helps projects get started close to home. "Family foundations like Stocker play a significant role in the nation's economic, social, and cultural life, especially in their home territory," the author writes.

Lacuna, Thomas. THE DECLINE AND FALL OF AMERICAN CIVILIZATION: CAN CHARACTER EDUCATION REVERSE THE SLIDE? (*The World & I*, vol. 11, no. 6, June 1996, pp. 285-307)
Character education is the deliberate effort by schools to develop and promote virtue. The author, one of the founders of the character-education movement, describes how it is gaining momentum in the United States. Character education assumes that there are certain immutable standards of decent and ethical behavior, such as honesty, compassion and nonviolence, which must be followed if society is to survive. "The challenge the movement sets before the nation is all-encompassing," he says, "for families, schools, faith communities, youth organizations — all those who touch the lives of the young — to come together in common cause to elevate the character of our youth and, ultimately, of society as a whole."

Moyes, Howard A. ADA WORKPLACE PUZZLES (*State Government News*, vol. 39, no. 4, April 1996, pp. 15-18)

ADA, the Americans with Disabilities Act, was signed into law in 1990, but employers and employees continue to wrestle with compliance issues. The article summarizes the law and gives examples of real-life dilemmas for which the act provides no easy answers. According to one state official, however, "Negotiations generally work out pretty well." Another says, "I have never had a request for an accommodation under the ADA that we could not handle."

Parini, Jay. FAITH AFTER THE FALL (*The World & I*, vol. 11, no. 6, June 1996, pp. 240-247)

This meditation on the career of John Updike calls Updike's 17th novel, *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, a work of "astonishing breadth and intellectual depth." Into its vast orbit, Parini says, "are pulled many of the concerns that have been featured in his previous fiction: the human quest for goodness; the nature of God's grace; the insistent, unsettling role that sexuality plays in the lives of men and women, and the unforgiving aspects of time." But Updike attempts, as he has never quite done before, "to comprehend the aspirations and failures of an entire nation. In four parts of roughly equal weight, beginning in 1910 and ending in 1990, he traces the lives of one family, the Wilmots, as they confront the loss of faith that, for Updike, is the central fact of our times."

Ruenzel, David. OLD-TIME RELIGION (*Education Week*, vol. 15, no. 27, March 27, 1996, pp. 30-35)

American public schools have long been wary of discussing issues of personal faith, but a growing number of teachers and scholars believe that today's students need to understand how religious beliefs have shaped the world in which they live. An increasing number of public schools are introducing courses that teach about religion without espousing a particular point of view. The article describes religious education programs in several school systems and explains why these programs do not conflict with the Constitutional separation of church and state.

Rybczynski, Witold. SOUNDS AS GOOD AS IT LOOKS (*The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 277, no. 6, June 1996, pp. 108-112)

The author traces the history of the Boston Symphony's new Seiji Ozawa Hall at Tanglewood, in

Massachusetts, which is modeled on the world's great concert halls. Built at the orchestra's rural summer facility, the hall is designed to serve as a summer recording studio, and to accommodate student orchestras, small ensembles and chamber music. The hall — whose architect had never before designed an orchestra hall — has been widely praised for the quality of its acoustics. Such acclaim is unusual for a new hall, the author says, explaining that "... the reaction to new halls has frequently been lukewarm if not downright hostile. It is usually the old halls that are loved and admired."

Taylor, Regina. THAT'S WHY THEY CALL IT THE BLUES (*American Theatre*, vol. 13, no. 4, April 1996, pp. 20-23)

Performer and playwright Regina Taylor describes the central role of blues music in the plays of August Wilson, focusing on his newest work, *Seven Guitars*. Set in post-World War II Pittsburgh, *Seven Guitars* is the sixth play — each set in a different decade — in Wilson's depiction of the 20th-century African-American experience. Wilson's "words — thick with the poetry, rhythm and mother-wit of the blues — give shadow, substance and heartbeat (as well as time, place and voice)" to his characters, the author says.

Watson, Bruce. A TOWN MAKES HISTORY BY RISING TO NEW HEIGHTS (*Smithsonian*, vol. 27, no. 3., June 1996, pp. 110-120)

Three years ago, the town of Valmeyer, Illinois (population 900), was one of many midwestern United States towns flooded by the Mississippi River. After the floods, the costliest in U.S. history, some towns cleaned up; others split up. But Valmeyer is making history, the author says, by literally moving the entire town to land on a bluff just above the ruins of the old town. The move is being made possible by a U.S. Government program in "hazard migration," and the determination and cooperation of its citizens, who are building a new town from scratch.

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